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Obstacles to Provision and Use of Development Information in Rural Communities in Nigeria

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Introduction

In an increasingly globalized and information-driven world, information has become a necessity and valuable commodity to individuals, organizations and societies in their existence. For individuals, it has become a tool for proper integration through interactive interpersonal networking and a means of maintaining a healthy balance in such interactions for the purposes of personal and group development. Many scholarly views exist on the value and usefulness of information as a tool for individual and societal development (Aboyade, 1985; Ndavi, 1990; Kibirige, 1996; and Uhegbu, 1997).

Aboyade (1985) particularly provides a refreshing and exciting perspective to the burning issue of information provision for mass mobilization from the rural grassroots upwards, and stresses that its implementation will address problems linked with present efforts in Nigeria and developing countries towards economic reconstruction, which now shifts emphasis from urban to rural development. Iwe (2003) concurs with this view by stating that rural development experts, planners and information scientists have identified information as an important input in rural development programmes. She avers further that development schemes or efforts in Nigeria failed in the past because of a lack of information at the planning and execution stages and posits the necessity to identify the areas of need of the rural community and to provide the information needed.

The information environment of the rural area is distinct from that of the urban environment due to obvious differences. The rural areas are mostly inhabited by people with low economic potentials, illiterates, semi-literates, school drop-outs, etc who have limited or no access to social amenities including agencies for information dissemination. The factor of illiteracy or low

level of illiteracy acts as a great inhibitor to information access and assimilation in rural communities in Nigeria.

When thinking of information that can help solve a problem in a development context, we inevitably see such information as being a resource with which to solve a particular problem. Because information plays such an important role in almost every human activity, its value in the development process has been a topic of extensive debate. According to Camble (1994), and Sturges and Neill (1990), lack of adequate and relevant information has impacted negatively on any development process. Although academics and researchers are aware of the value of information in development, there is some concern that information is still not perceived as being as important as other resources. Neelameghan (1980), Camara (1990) and (Sturges and Neill, 1990) posit that planners, developers and governments do not yet acknowledge the role of information as a basic resource, or are unaware of its potential value.

It seems that people are not always aware of what information entails (Manzvanzvike, 1993). It seems also that the extent to which information users in developing communities are able to handle information (i.e. the extent to which they use information) will determine the usefulness of information as a development resource. Ozowa (1995) is of the opinion that a general lack of awareness among rural people can be attributed to their high level of illiteracy. However, the nature (and particularly its attributes) has not yet been challenged as a possible reason why information is not viewed in the same light as other development process. Information is power, but in the other hand, information by itself is worthless and cannot solve problems as information has power only when used and applied effectively (Boon, 1992). This apparent contradiction lies the strength of this article as it strives to discuss the attributes of information and how these attributes comply with development requirements for rural communities.

Development Information: Conceptual Analysis

Among the ingredients needed to drive developmental process in rural communities is the supply of needed information as a tool of empowerment to take meaningful decisions. Development information relates specifically to the information packaging and dissemination efforts targeted specially at rural communities, with aim of improving their conditions of life when utilized. Uhegbu (2004) and Imhabekhai and Olumukoro (2007) are of the view that well informed and information-conscious citizens is a road-map to sustainable development, be it economic, social, environmental, educational, or even technological. Development information aims at changing people's negative values, educating them on better ways of achieving set goals, imparting new ideas or knowledge, and generally empowering the target audience to take better decisions that will improve their current state of affairs. Researches by Aboyade (1989) and Uhegbu (1997) reveal that rural Nigeria is experiencing and increased flow of information. However, the packaging and mode of dissemination, it is alleged, do not address the development needs of the rural populace as adequately as needed. To drive the process of rural development in Nigeria, information packaging and dissemination must be done to meet the specific demands of development information provisioning.

Information comes in many different forms, and is expressed in many different ways. Information can take on any value in the context of an individual situation. This proves that, as a resource, information is different from most other resources. The very fact that information is characterized as a dynamic force, constantly altering and extending a store of knowledge corresponds with situations in development in which information is offered to non-literate people to alter their understanding of certain practices, which in turn can help them solve problems (such as improving standard of living (Rogers, 1992).

Information almost always forms part of technology (Röling, 1990). Without its information component, technology has little value as a resource for

potential users who are not familiar with its workings or its background. With regard to developing non-literate societies, one should bear in mind that it is not necessarily new technology that brings about these achievements. All new technology applied for the first time is viewed as new to non-literate people, or that particular situation, and could have similar effects. From a development point of view, there is more emphasis, first, on improving people's lives socially, and only secondly on economic improvement in development, new technology is often introduced with the help of education, training and visual demonstration. The training will help people in rural communities to increase perceptions, enhance competences and enhance self-esteem.

A frequent complaint is that information often derives its role as a resource (Boon, 1992), yet, when looking at the effect of information on development situations, there seems to be an underlying awareness of information as the hidden component of technology on, say, agriculture on the basis of such areas as increased farm income, improved health, reduced risk, better standard of living and overall economic growth.

The above seem to emphasize the impact of the dynamic force of information, where the extension or altering of people's stores of knowledge positively affects their social well-being. Although, information is an intangible entity, it has the ability to bring about change for the better, which is the ultimate goal of development information.

The Rural Community in Nigeria

Places are generally considered rural when they lack basic social amenities such as good roads, health care, power supply, pipe-borne drinkable water, schools and markets, whether or not they are distant from urban areas. The rural dwellers consist mostly of illiterates, subsistence farmers, artisans, and mostly old people, with few young people. They live in poor and deprived conditions due to the lack of these basic necessities of life. Iwe (2003) describes with slightly different view, the rural area in Nigerian context, as any area that is far from the urban city, a village, a hinterland with no good access roads, no pipe-borne water, no electricity, and no factories and industries. She further states that rural communities differ from one another in demographic composition, general characteristics, area of land, etc, and that in spite of these differences, researchers believe that about 70 percent of the population of every average rural community in Nigeria suffer from illiteracy.

The level of illiteracy in Nigeria's rural communities poses difficulties in the provision and utilization of information for any meaningful rural development and is not consonant with Julius Nyerere's assertion as quoted by Aboyade (1985) that while others try to reach the moon, we are trying to reach the villages.

A Review of the Rural Information Environment in Nigeria

The way in which people used to the oral tradition handle information gives the impression that they can better relate to information exchanged in the way they are accustomed to. Meyer's (2000) study of information seeking-behaviour of a people originating from the oral tradition led to an identification of communication mechanism, which in turn reflected the information seeking-behaviour typical of people used to the oral tradition.

In Nigerian rural communities, as examples of oral traditional societies, information is stored in people's memories. Therefore, people with good memories play a vital role in storing and transferring information, and so the death of a knowledgeable person may lead to valuable information being lost,

when the information had not been shared or transferred to other members of his community. Another factor in oral traditions is that the manner in which information is communicated largely determines whether the community will react to it or not. For example, if the message content of the information is not demonstrated in a way people are used to, they will not be able to understand it and it will not make any impression in them. This explains why information is normally exchanged face-to-face. Often, information remains within the borders of a particular community and unless people of different communities interact, information-created in other communities remains inaccessible.

Mnemonic aids such as symbols are widely used to make the oral transfer of information more reliable in Nigerian rural communities.

Information handling in Nigerian rural communities leads to the idea that both the nature and the information environment in the rural communities help rural planners to apply appropriate communication mechanisms of the target group to enhance acceptance of new information needed for development purposes.

The Obstacles and the Solutions to Rural Development Information in Nigeria

In order to understand how information seeking behaviour of the rural people can impact on their acceptance of new information it is necessary to consider how rural people respond to these information attributes identified as less needed for development purposes (Eaton and Bawden, 1991).

Intangibility of information: Because information is not a tangible resource for development as is technology, or as agricultural products, rural people often do not realize that they may lack information in certain aspects, which otherwise could help them solve their problem, and to progress. Ignorance of information as an aid could be ascribed to the fact that rural people are more inclined to make sense of real-life objects they are familiar with or of abstract things they can compare to physical objects they are familiar with—for example, comparing a circle to the moon, or a square to a house, etc. This perhaps explains why they find it so difficult to perceive and accept information above new concepts provided by way of a discussion on a particular topic without any visual demonstrations or comparison to something they can identify with. So to address the problem of intangibility, it is important that the source of information makes use of communication mechanisms such as comparisons, metaphors or visual demonstration the rural people can relate to.

Information interdependent on technology: In this knowledge era, where information almost always forms part of technology (whether as a product or as a process), it is evident that information on that product or process will not be well received by rural people when provided in isolation. Consequently, these people will be unable to add the information to existing knowledge. This could be ascribed to rural people's inclination to relate any new information to real-life objects or situations. To counteract this negative impact, development efforts should not only use technology-based information transfer, but also explain, by way of demonstration, how to apply simple development-oriented technology, and the gains associated with it.

Information is culture-dependent: There is also the problem of cultural dependence. If it is accepted that information is socially conditioned and shaped by social environment from which it is originated (Shields and Servaes, 1989), it should be remembered that if that information is transferred to a rural community with a different social background and environment, chances are that the information will not be understood in the way it was intended to. This is because background knowledge is not transferred along with the information. To mitigate the negative impact of culture-dependence of information those

involved in rural development need to provide additional information about related aspects in order to put the background into perspective for the prospective rural audience. Additional effort can also be made by providing information about related issues, such as reasons for using fertilizers and applying weed control, in agricultural information transfer, for example.

Information is dependent on medium: Information captured in a written or digital format is not accessible to people used to the oral tradition, since they never learned to read or access this type of format to find a solution to their problems. This problem can be solved by transferring the required information by word-of-mouth and face-to-face demonstration of important concepts. In this way, those engaged in rural development can easily avoid the pitfall of inappropriate media by not assuming that rural people will accept information on a particular topic when offered in a picture or even audio-visual format, such as a television programme. The information packaged in images or audio-visual format will not have the intended effect unless potential users have enough background knowledge of the topic. Suppliers of development information therefore, should consider the use of media that they know the rural people are familiar with. Information becomes more useful when packaged for a specific situation -more so in the case where users in a rural community lack specific information and background knowledge on a particular problem. In such a case, chunks of information put together in a new package will be more useful and readily accepted than when transferred in its original package(s).

Conclusion

This paper has proved that knowledge of information seeking-behaviour, including use of appropriate communication mechanism, can be applied to reverse noticed negative trends in information transfer for rural development. From the arguments raised in this discussion, it could be deduced that an understanding of the nature of information and being appreciative of the information seeking-behaviour of people used to the oral tradition can be put to good use by those wishing to contribute to the development of rural communities and upliftment of the rural populace through appropriate information dissemination mechanisms. Application of appropriate information communication mechanism will help the rural dwellers to avoid pitfalls that could constrain development efforts in Nigerian rural communities.

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